

Food Hubs Support Local Food Relationships in Vermont

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We know food is a very personal topic for many people and have found the value in developing local food systems around connections and relationships with our food. In Vermont, agriculture connects our communities through creating successful engagement between local producers and consumers. This delicate process of connecting producers with local and regional customers is integral to the development of a viable food system in Vermont and the Northeast region and is a critical role for food hubs.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines a food hub as: *“a business or organization that is actively coordinating the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified locally or regionally grown food products from primarily small to mid-sized producers.”* In Vermont, over twenty-four community food groups have formed with the goal of supporting local agriculture in their region and at least fifteen of these entities are actively engaged in food hub activities. Not all of these food hubs perform aggregation, distribution and marketing roles; some assist with consumer education about the importance of buying local, supporting Vermont farms, and stewardship of healthy soils and clean water. Most of these groups were established in response to specific community needs and requests for assistance.

Communicating directly with the over 7,000 individual agricultural entrepreneurs and over 620,000 eaters in the state is not feasible. Connecting Vermont's regional food hubs to discuss their programs, share success stories, and assist with overcoming challenges in their community is reasonable. This was the intent of eight food hubs in creating the Vermont Regional Food Center Collaborative in 2009. They agreed to meet quarterly to develop a shared vision of creating a *“vibrant, economically just and environmentally sustainable food system where locally-produced food is available and affordable for all Vermonters, and where the vitality of agriculture in Vermont is key to the conservation of our land and the progress of our sustainable economy.”* Since the Collaborative's first gathering, increased access to affordable, healthy local food has occurred across Vermont; and our food hubs have been instrumental in the process.

Hans Estrin and Vern Grubinger of UVM Extension share how the Windham Farm and Food Network (WFFN) launched in September 2009 with no budget and the support of only a few farmers, a school food service director, and market coordinator. WFFN focuses on a small geographic area (~30 mile radius) with established wholesale food producers. They attribute their successful start-up to its efficient network that minimizes storage and transportation costs using existing infrastructure, relies on a cooperating network of farmers and processors who individually have specific foods they are efficient at producing, and using a web-based ordering and invoicing system that limits administrative costs and makes it easy for producers and buyers to participate.

In the beginning, a supportive farmer agreed to piggyback a few more farms on his delivery truck and distribute local product to a few schools in the area. The network sold \$10,000 of produce in its first three months and was off and running. WFFN projects \$140,000 in sales for

2012, by connecting more than 25 food producers with over 35 wholesale buyers in the area, mostly cafeterias, food stores and buying clubs.

And remember, similar food hubs success stories are arising in over 20 other communities across the state. Food hubs are part of the local food movement.